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She Who Waits

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SHE WHO WAITS

by

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She slammed the door of her '60 Chevy, which was younger than she was, and not without its internal problems, and headed for the parking ramp elevator. Steam rose from the hospital roof with a snarl, shrouding the pathetic slick scurrying of miniature drivers and walkers below. The air was heavy and wet, like a church holding a rainy week's worth of yawns. She punched the black button and looked down. Cheap shoes. Nothing lasts.

A Coney Island "bing." She stepped into the dank metal box which must have carried the pile of Hershey bar wrappers and wadded prophylactic foil for thousands of free rides. Another round at the hospital.

The corridor filled itself with gurney wheels carrying tiny children with too-large eyes watching green-covered caretakers who were careful not to clank the children's too-eager escorts: inverted bottles perpetually dripping some thick red or sloshing clear juices quietly into tiny arms. Busy wheels. Chairs on wheels bearing riders with heads of hair like confused maps, random deserts of unprotected scalp, thin and matted the hair that survived.

"X-Ray." "Admitting Desk." "Hematology." She turned at the last sign and walked into the waiting room, hunting for an empty seat for after the checking in.

"You'll need a bone marrow exam today. We'll want to do that first before your other blood work is done," the nurse was saying. She was young with thick dark hair that defied the small white cap. Her face glowed pink like the tips of her ears.

"Yes, I know," Kara murmured and headed for an empty seat with a good view of the exit. A tall lanky man in a brown serge suit walked in and headed slowly for the desk. After he spoke quietly with the nurse, he took a seat in the opposite row. The suit coat shoulders dimpled deeply on all sides as though there might not be anyone inside. His cheek bones

sloped into the lunar eclipses of his cheeks, almost cavernous, needing support.

"Chemotherapy, and he said it was a brand new . . ." A woman's voice trailed off as heads turned hopefully.

"Kara Peterson." She walked to the desk and drew a deep, uneven breath.

". . . and when you get to the examining room," the nurse was saying, "just go right in." The nurse told this like a fortune teller giving directions to a better life and smiled pleasantly.

Kara made the short walk looking for a drink, even a mirage, but found a drinking fountain outside the examining room. She turned to the door, then suddenly grabbed the fountain handle again, one more drink, and walked rigidly into the white-walled room.

The doctor held a clipboard and mumbled something about her name and how was she today? He stood between two tables draped in white. One glistened with sharp things made of steel. The other was empty.

"Won't you lie down right here, please." A heartbeat with air in it whooshed in and out of her ears. Like a seashell's heart. The doctor pulled off her shirt and draped her torso with a thick stiff green sheet. His fingers searched and pressed the hard bone between her breasts, then basted it with Merthiolate. She shivered and dug her heels into the crisp hard table and shut her eyes.

A hot dart hits the bull's-eye. Sticks and pokes through to thump against the bone but will not stop. The needle, unrelenting, pops the bone to the deep core and is hot inside, pulling out what is in her center. The big tube fills with the thickness, her deep red.

II

She steadied herself at the landing, digging in her satchel for the keys. The knob suddenly pivoted, the door swung back. Kevin stood in the doorway.

"Well, dolly girl, how was your day?" His mouth half-smiled, half-mocked her.

"You're home early," she answered flatly. She walked past him without looking up and laid the baby on the daybed and

began to undress him. She shifted on the bed to reach the tiny blue knit hat and to rest her back against a large turtle-shaped pillow.

"I checked with the Admissions Office today," Kevin curled his lips around a cigarette and lit up, holding cupped hands like his hero Albert Camus. He blew the smoke nonchalantly into runaway rings.

"The bastards won't let me in until I go to a junior college first and get my grades up. God, a person with an I.Q. of 160 working as a gravedigger! I don't even know who I *am* anymore."

The baby whimpered. Kara undid her top buttons and gave the child her breast. Kevin reached down toward a Pepsi can on his desk and, holding the cigarette's lit end down, hit its middle with a jagged fingernail. The ash landed with an angry hiss.

"Someone like me, I should be sitting outside near the woods somewhere writing poetry."

"I don't know, Kevin." Kara glanced at him, then shifted her eyes back to the baby, his eyes closed, sleeping between fits of his mouth's motor.

"These medical bills—we can probably file with the county and that should help some. Can't squeeze blood out of a turnip." He smiled triumphantly.

"I have to go back in two weeks. They want to run some more tests," Kara said evenly.

Kevin studied her. "Is that all? Is that all they said? Christ, Kara, why do you look *down* all the time? You're *always* looking down."

Her mouth tightened as she curled her arms snugly around the sleeping child and scooted forward on the bed, then slowly rose and walked out of the room. Kevin followed, his six feet of shadow spilling over hers in a brief hallway movie. At the end of the hall was a white bassinet which had once been filled with doll limbs at the Salvation Army. She lay the baby on his stomach and nestled the blankets around him in a flannel bubble, then caressed his monk's hairline and walked into the bedroom, tucking herself into an overstuffed rocking chair by the window. Kevin shut the door and sat on the bed, his long legs stretched to the footboard.

"Are you going to withdraw now, Kara?"

"There's nothing to say."

"Doctors don't know shit; I think it's all psychosomatic."

"What?"

"I've been reading up on these blood diseases. What you have is probably caused by depression."

"Depression?" Her voice was faint.

"It's in your family. These things can be inherited. I mean, look at your mother, she reminds me of a little bird —"

"Don't start."

"Aw, now, you know you like to talk about your family."

"I don't . . . want to."

"Look, I want to talk to somebody besides the lazy buffalo I work with. Those people have never read anything. Their whole lives are tied up with keeping the spades sharp and mowing the Garden of Memories."

Kara slid her legs under her and stared out at the branches, which rubbed each other, yet seemed not to touch.

"God, I'm so sick of your being depressed. I'm sick of you withdrawing. If it hadn't been for me you'd be on the streets of Baltimore, getting your sweet little —"

"Shut up! You have no right, no right. You're the one who had to climb a fence to your neighbor's swimming pool to get water to flush the toilet. You and your aristocratic family. You know what I call your family? The aristocrats without any toilet paper. A joke. Monogrammed towels in a house with the utilities cut off."

"What do you want me to do?" Kevin shouted wildly. "Tell them I never want to see them again? Tell them to get out of my life?"

"Keep them away from me. You stood there while she insulted me. At least you could've defended me. You could've stopped her. But you just stood there like you couldn't disagree in the slightest with anything she said."

Kevin paused, his face the expression of a man who has given name and rank and will reveal nothing more. His voice was instructive.

"You just have to ignore my mother."

"You just let them take over. I have no say in my own

house. She calls collect and you accept the charges. Thanks to her we don't even have a phone anymore."

"Kara, I think you need more rest. It's no use crying over spilled brains." He threw back his head in mocking laughter and winked at her.

"You're the best one, Kara, I always thought so."

Kara closed her hands in loose fists trying to put fingers into the safe places of palms but they were too small and too cold. She locked her thumbs and put the palms on her lap, trying to save the safe places, but it was everywhere, the cold threat, seeking her out.

Kevin reached down toward the footboard and pulled a small paper bag from the ragged pocket of his Army jacket.

"In honor of your mother's visit, I decided to pick up a small token of my esteem." He twisted off the cap and took a generous swig of apricot brandy, finishing with a satisfied sigh, and turned to her as though struck by a new idea. "Won't you have a little nightcap with me?"

Kara looked out the window, her expression holding the view of a line at whose end she waited, uplifted by a hint of distraction. Her voice was quiet and reluctant, a voice that fit a mouth stiff from holding itself. Her nostrils flared slightly as the brandy's hot sweetness stung the air.

"I don't care for any."

"When is she due to arrive at our humble abode?" Kevin was taking the tone that accompanied his more lucid moments of introspection. "You know, I really like your mother. It's just that your mother doesn't like me. Certain kinds of women—I've been around them all my life—they love to tell everybody what to do. Especially 'The Male.'" Kevin sometimes slipped into the third person when he was being particularly intimate.

"Well, what do *you* think, Kara? Think we can get through the visit without having a fight?" Kevin suddenly clambered to his feet and bowed deeply. "Hellooo, Mrs. Lady," he intoned, squeezing the end of each word with tin nasality. "We'd be most pleased to have you stay at our hotel. You can stay in the guest room. Or how about the parlor and you can sleep on the sofa?" His mouth twisted with sarcasm.

"She said she'd probably get here around seven. I wish you wouldn't . . ."

"Why, it's nearly that time now," he bellowed. "Wish I wouldn't what? You just keep her off my back. She thinks she knows how everybody should live just because she did her duty and went to her little cubicle every day for thirty years."

"You say that like there's something wrong with working every day."

"Well, you know, don't you, that since your people were working class you had something to rebel against. A study in 1953 on attitudes post-adolescents had toward—"

"God."

"What did you say?"

"I'm tired. I'm going to lie down."

"Well, you just go right ahead, dolly girl, and don't you worry your tired little brain. And I won't either."

"Jesus." Kara turned toward the window.

"By God, you are a dyed-in-the-wool Catholic, doing all this invoking. Hand me some more cigarettes from the carton there, will ya, and I'll leave you to your happy thoughts." He caught her feeble toss. "I'll let you know when 'The Guest' arrives."

The door closed him away, his steps dimming. To her they were jackhammers. She lifted herself to reach the blankets and let out a breath between arranging bedclothes and limbs, then sank back into the pillow.

His words whirled into long lines and spun faster into a giant cone, carrying her into a deep, small faraway corner with narrower lines. She spun up and became one of the lines and could pass through the cone, fading to grey with no lines, melting to bands which carried her through a wall and she had her body back but ran at lightning speed from someone selling green print neckties. She floated down staircases and got away from the maniac in a fury of leaping and then she could jump out of sight and he could not capture her. Down the asphalt driveway, she sprang off into a third story view of a clay roof to hurry and catch a breath and someone had called the police van and she could stay in the air longer, never land, with just a breath—

"You belong with her," someone was shouting. "You should still be suckling at your mother's breast."

"Get off my back. You never had any use for me since the

day we met. You're a parasite, you come here to feed, you have nothing to offer from your little life."

"I have nothing to offer? I have nothing? Look who's talking, Mr. Professional Student. You've done the best job you could to ruin my daughter's life. Work's too good for you and your people. Your aunt told me all about how your mother didn't know them when she had her place in high society. And now she comes over there running up all kinds of long-distance telephone bills."

She turned over to the wall, but the shouting amplified.

"You don't even begin to come close to being in the same league with my mother."

"Yes, and thank the Lord for that."

"Get out. Get out of my life."

"There, that'll cool you down, doggie."

"You bitch. You bitch." The door crashed against the wall. Kevin's boots thundered down the stairs. She lay rigid while water splashed and a chair scraped the kitchen floor. The water flowed again. Measured steps and a knock came to her door.

"Come on in, Ma."

"How are you, honey?" Her mother leaned forward and put a Lady-Esther-cold-cream-scented kiss on her cheek. Kara's eyes narrowed but she smiled wanly and let her mother hold her hand.

"I'm fine, Ma. Really. You smell like coffee."

"Kara, it was hardly warm. He only got about half a cup. He was surprised more than anything. I cleaned up what spilled."

"Ma!"

"Doesn't he help you with anything? He acts like he's got a screw loose somewhere."

"I don't know. He's just . . . he gets depressed about not being in school."

"Well, lah-dee-dah. What about you? I paid out all that money for flute lessons and you never did a damn thing about keeping up."

"I play sometimes."

"Now I want you to tell me everything the doctors said."

We'll want the finest care money can buy."

"Right. Well, they asked a lot of questions. About oven cleaner and bug killer. They said I shouldn't play hardball or tackle football." She smiled faintly.

"What? Tackle—?"

"Oh. Well, it's because I guess—" Kara tucked her lips between her teeth and paused. "I get tired real easy and it would just be too much. I don't even like it, anyway."

"Really? What a strange thing to tell a young woman who is hardly athletic looking. I just think you should put on a few pounds. Most people don't take enough Vitamin K. You know, Vitamin K is a new vitamin not too many people know about. It's needed for the blood to clot and that's what you're probably missing. Do you get enough to eat? There's hardly a thing in the house. And I'll tell you, I found a bag of that dope weed out on his desk. He thinks we're all stupid or something. Does he smoke that all the time?"

"There's food, Ma. And he doesn't smoke it all the time. He works very hard at a job he despises." Kara fingered the quilt hem. "And he didn't want to even stay here. But he did. He could have left us on our own."

"I can hardly see how you live with someone like that. He doesn't even have a sense of humor."

"He has one. You've never heard it. He used to say such crazy things when I was so down and he made me laugh. He makes up stories sometimes and they aren't like any I've ever heard."

"I'll bet."

"I know, you've never gotten along. You've never gotten to know him. But he's not like anyone I've ever known."

"That may be. Well, dear, I must get checked into a motel before it gets too late. I'll call in a while to let you know where I'm staying."

"He's really very—he's really . . . a *good* person. Deep down. He really is."

Her mother's brow curled with puzzlement, but quickly smoothed as she stood up. "Yes. Yes, Kara. Now, you get all the rest you can. You'll need it to take care of that little boy."

III

At least the new apartment had a porch. Among other

things. Such as cockroaches so spirited that nocturnal bathroom visits were best navigated with hands at one's sides while walking through doorways. Walls that let hands measure the force of the wind.

Better than some places. She thought of an open refrigerator, quart mayonnaise jars filled with blue and white capsules. What was his name? He said she cared only for the capsules. Couldn't go out there, either. People stared too much. Probably their own paranoia.

She sat on the couch manipulating knitting needles, but they moved like disjointed horse's legs. She squinted into the last rows, found an unwelcome bump, frowned and pulled out the offending stitches, dropped the piece in her lap and looked out the window. She had been indoors all day.

She had spent over an hour trying on clothes. She settled on some squarely-cut pants and a shirt still musty-smelling from the box Kevin's mother gave them. They all made her feel ugly.

She remembered the dress, an irridescent bright green print with flared sleeves. It was very short. She still kept it—hidden away at the back of the closet. It had a big rip under one arm and the hem was unravelling. He had said he was lonely and wanted to paint her portrait. But the bastard had torn her dress.

She looked like she might have stuffed her mouth with bread; her eyes were just as puffy. She covered the pimples the medicine caused with a thick pancake makeup which did a good job of making every area it touched the same color, even if it did nothing noble for her complexion. At least the huge bruises were gone from her legs. So were the tiny red dots. She could even brush her teeth without the usual swirl of blood washing from her gums. And she could stand up without feeling dizzy, even when she was holding Peter.

But she still winced when she remembered the driver education teacher calling her "sir." She hoped no one else heard it or saw the color rush to her face. She had not gone back since. The whole thing had been Kevin's idea. Jesus, first the intern asked, "Isn't long hair a bother?" Then they gave her weekly shots in the hip that made smooth muscles into little knots. They didn't ask if she minded growing a moustache. Damn drug made her voice waffly. Like a boy's

when he is becoming a man. Kevin unknowingly helped out the other side effect by bringing her erotic novels by Henry Miller. Well, she had her private afternoon nap, along with pleasure that was sure and sweet. She smiled and pulled out the photo album. In the back was a section she used for clippings about health problems like her own. She included a copy of a letter she mailed to a political columnist who used his last column to describe his illness and its seriousness. She liked the idea that they had almost the same illness. She also recorded her blood count. Hemoglobin had been 2.2 at its lowest. That was when she had to have a transfusion. They just had her check into the hospital for a few hours and when she stepped back onto the street, colors seemed brighter and when she pressed her fingernails to whiteness, the pink rushed back as soon as she let go.

She jumped as she heard the back door slam and feet stomp. She quickly closed the album and picked up the tangle of stitches.

"You had a message," she called out. Kevin said something she could not understand as he opened the refrigerator. A can whooshed away its pop top and the steps came closer. Kevin took the big chair with the worn nap. The chair webs were torn so he sank down into a slouch, parking the beer can on an ample arm.

"Yeah? Who was it?" His voice was tired.

"Mrs. Trimble said the walk wasn't shoveled 'til nearly nine and so she had to wait to do her grocery shopping."

"Oh, she did, did she? Well, that's too goddamned bad. I'm not gonna be a lackey for these people. That other one up there, don't tell her anything. She's the worst gossip in town."

"But she's always been nice to us. After all, she gave us that money from her club so you could go back to school."

"Bunch of do-gooders. Asking 'is the baby clean?' They just do that to get rid of their guilt. They feed off other people's problems. You don't talk to them, do you?"

"I don't talk to anybody. You're the one with the stimulating day."

"Christ, now you're bored. I only work full-time with a full load of classes. What in the hell do you want?"

"I want some help with the upkeep here. How do you

think I feel when they come home and I'm in the hallway vacuuming their dirt? You expect me to do all the housework, all the childcare, the laundry *and* keep the hallways clean so we don't lose this place. We *owe* them the work. It's not honest to say you're going to do something and get paid and then not do it."

"Oh, take a taxi, then. You sound just like your mother." His eyes flashed but his voice seemed to lose interest. "Hey, this elavil is a great alcohol extender. I feel like I've drunk a six-pack already."

"Do you think that's a good idea? I mean, I don't know if you should drink when you're taking anti-depressants."

"What the hell? Man's got to have a little pleasure in life." He stretched and got up. "Want one? Probably wouldn't hurt you."

"I just don't like it especially."

Kevin headed for the kitchen and was back in seconds dangling the beer cans from their plastic strap. "Well, what *do* you like especially? We might as well be roommates, now that we've got twin beds. I feel like I'm living in a goddamned boardinghouse."

The room was silent. Kara studied the design in the shimmery green-red tapestry behind him.

"What *is* this? My wife, my wife treats me like somebody who delivers the newspaper. What's wrong? I'm just some brute who brings home the bacon."

"Talk to me, goddamn it!"

"I don't like to talk to you when you're drinking."

"Wifey, you don't like to talk to me at all. Not anymore. Well, what happened? Somebody else tickle your fancy?"

"You're drunk and I don't feel like being insulted."

"Well, I only meant you cut quite a figure in your heyday."

"Yeah, and now I don't. My face looks like a mask made out of pizza."

"Oh, c'mon now, you won't be on that all your life. Hey, I really wanna know. Dontcha ever think about the old days, y'know, the romance? I always thought we were a striking couple."

"I don't like to think about the 'old days.'"

"Kara, I don't understand what . . . you were so independent. Remember when you took me up to the Bahai Temple? You wouldn't tell me where we were going, just kept giving me such crazy directions, I thought we were gonna drive into the damn lake."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Then, when we got there, the garden was all lit up, just like in one of those viewfinders. The light looked like it came from everywhere. You said you took people there you wanted to fall in love with."

"Please. I don't want to hear about it."

"Why? But why don't you want to hear about it? I think of those times as being very happy. Don't you have any warm feelings toward me at all? And the little baby boy, I helped you out of a jam . . ."

"Yeah, you helped me out of a jam. Thanks. Thanks a lot."

"Is that all it is to you?" His voice quavered. "Oh, Christ, I'm . . ."

Kevin jumped up and hurried down the hall. She heard him being sick and didn't want to listen. He sounded like he was trying to scare someone with monster sounds, like he might cough up his lungs.

"Kara . . . Kara," he moaned.

She walked slowly down the hall and peered in. He was on his knees, pale and sweating, and bumbled through his words.

"Cigarette. Can ya . . . get me . . . please."

She turned and walked casually, deliberately, to the living room, picked up the pack and headed calmly back to the bathroom. She extended her hand.

"Couldja . . . Ohhh, wouldja light it for me?" Kevin's dilated eyes were wet and bloodshot.

She lit the cigarette like a pro and put it in his mouth. He drew in deeply and grabbed the porcelain rim.

"Oh, yeah," he rasped, "that's so much better. Kara, I know you must really care if you'd do that for me." He cleared his throat. "I can tell you really must care."

Kara's swollen eyes were fixed with only the slightest tinge of pleasure.